

VOLTA BUREAU,
FOR THE INCREASE AND DIFFUSION OF KNOWLEDGE RELATING TO THE DEAF.
WASHINGTON CITY, U. S. A.

SUPPLEMENT ELUCIDATING
CIRCULAR OF INFORMATION, No. 4.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TWO SYSTEMS OF TEACHING DEAF-MUTE CHILDREN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Extracts from a letter to a parent requesting information relative to the prevailing methods of teaching the English language to Deaf-Mutes in America, by JOSEPH C. GORDON, M. A.,
Ph. D., Superintendent of the Illinois Institution for the Education of the Deaf.
Author of "Education of the Deaf," "Hints to Parents," etc.



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The principal methods of instructing deaf-mutes in America are two, the sign-language method, and the English-language method. By the former method, deaf-mute children learn from other deaf-mutes and their teachers a peculiar language of motions of the arms and upper part of the body to which they learn to attach signification through usage. This language of motions, or "signs," is acquired by deaf pupils more readily than any other means of communication. It is learned by deaf pupils so readily that it is regarded by many educators as the natural language of the deaf. As a matter of fact "signs" or gestures are no more natural to the deaf child than to the hearing child.

In the "sign-language" method of teaching, the English language is considered a foreign language, and deaf and dumb children are taught this "foreign language" very largely, if not altogether, through translation from the indefinite and crude sign-language previously acquired at school or through association with sign-taught deaf-mutes.

The other method of instructing deaf-mutes is the English-language method. In this method deaf-mute children are not encouraged to learn the sign-language for school purposes, and no attempt is made to translate the sign-language into English. The children are taught to connect objects, actions, feelings, etc., within the range of their experience directly with the appropriate English expression in the written or spoken form from the very first. For instance,—to illustrate the two methods. To teach the English word *cat* to a deaf child, a "sign" teacher would show the child a cat if possible, or a picture of a cat, which would be recognized by the child. The next step would be to direct attention to the cat's whiskers, drawing

the thumb and finger of each hand lightly over them. A similar motion with the thumb and finger of each hand above the teacher's upper lip, at once becomes a sign for cat. The instructed deaf child will be expected to recall the object, cat, on seeing this conventional sign. The child must learn this sign, from a "sign-teacher's" point of view, before he is prepared to learn the English word "cat."

After the sign has become familiar the child is trained to write the word cat on a slate, blackboard or sheet of paper and by frequent repetition the pupil associates the written word with the sign for cat so that the written word recalls the gestural sign and the gestural sign serves to recall the idea, or more strictly speaking, the concept, "cat."

The intuitive, or direct, method called in this country the English-language method, would require the use of the living cat, or the recognition of the picture of a cat, by the deaf child, but would connect the written or spoken word "cat" directly with the object without the intervention of any artificial finger-sign for "cat."

Another illustration. To teach the English word *dog*, by the first method, a real dog is shown if possible, or a picture of a dog, whereupon the teacher presses the thumb and second finger together, snapping them as the arm is drawn toward the body repeatedly, as one might do in coaxing a dog to him, or in arousing a sleeping dog. This is the conventional sign for the object "dog." After the child has acquired this sign he is taught to associate this with the written word "dog." In the intuitive, direct or English-language method the child is taught to write or to speak the English word immediately in connection with the presentation of the living object or a picture of a dog.

It should be remarked that finger-spelling is not the sign-language of the deaf and dumb. In fact finger-spelling was not invented by them nor for them. Finger-spelling affords a finger form for every letter in the alphabet and by means of it English words are spelled out upon the fingers instead of being written with a pen or pencil. Many teachers of deaf children use finger-spelling interchangeably with writing in applying the English-language method which excludes the intermediacy of artificial signs between ideas and their expression in English as useless and harmful.

Wherever the direct, or intuitive method prevails, the English language in its written or spoken forms, or in its finger-spelled form becomes the ordinary means of communication between teachers and pupils, so that every step in instruction in

the school-room requires the use of the English language, which is practically both the instrument and the immediate end of instruction. The ulterior object is, of course, familiarity with the great fund of ideas expressed in printed and written and spoken English. Partisans of the "sign-method" concede the desirability of both the end and the means employed in the intuitive method, though generally they consider the intuitive method impracticable, or at least inexpedient in the earlier stages of instruction.

All so called Oral Schools for the education of the Deaf follow the intuitive method of teaching language.

Some of the largest schools for the deaf in the world, have abandoned the "sign method" in favor of the intuitive method with gratifying results. This method has been adopted by the New York Institution, the Pennsylvania Institution and the Illinois Institution among others.

Some intuitive method schools make free use of the finger alphabet, or the spelling out of English words on the fingers as the ordinary means of instruction in school instead of following out the slower process of writing out the words with pen or pencil. This is sometimes called the Rochester Method, on account of the prominence given to finger spelling in the Western New York Institution. Of course any deaf person who can finger spell what he wishes to say can also write the same thing in English, and the deaf pupil who has mastered English through finger spelling has no difficulty in understanding letters written to him in English, or any printed matter within the range of his capacity.

The intelligent observer will note that the two methods or systems are mutually exclusive.

Of course no pupil can be taught under the intuitive and the sign method at the same time, and it is impossible to combine into one system a method which is dependent upon the "sign" language at every stage of instruction with a method which dispenses absolutely with the "sign" language at every stage in teaching the English language. In the "sign-language" method instructors aim to teach the vernacular language through the intervention of signs, but their deaf-mute pupils acquire a mixture of natural signs, pantomime, conventional signs and finger spelling which become the habitual vehicle of thought and expression, wherever it is possible to use a gestural language, to the exclusion of the English language. The intuitive method dispenses entirely with the crutch of the "sign-language" in the mastery of English.

The intuitive system has not been wrought out in all its details, or systematized or reduced to practice in this country, fully enough for the impartial observer to decide upon its merits from every point of view, but it is constantly gaining ground as a system and at the same time it is revolutionizing the practice of schools formerly committed to the "sign" method of instruction.

The only aim of this paper being to state the fundamental difference between the methods or processes of teaching deaf children the English language as practiced in America at the present time, no statement is herein attempted of other differences in systems more striking to the superficial observer but less radical in character.

